

Non-Paper

A New Momentum for Enlargement

Contribution in view of the upcoming EU-Western Balkans summit (5 June 2026) and the EU-Moldova summit (22 June 2026)

More than 20 years have passed since the Thessaloniki European Council. Enlargement remains one of the most attractive offers and most influential policy instrument the Union has. But the enlargement policy needs a new momentum – the upcoming summits that the EU will hold with the Western Balkans (5 June) and with Moldova (22 June) represent an opportunity not to be missed. Our joint aim is to complete the Union as a truly *European* Union. To turn this aspiration into reality and to inject a new dynamism, we must provide additional incentives as part of a merit-based, gradual integration process and streamline the current process to make it more efficient and to allow for faster and deeper integration into the EU on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria.

To this end we aim at a new, process-oriented approach which cuts over-formalized hurdles for intermediate steps and simplifies the current methodology (i.e. by merging some procedural steps). Moreover, with the full agreement of Member States, we should advance the opening of all relevant negotiation clusters where the Commission proposes so. The work of the aspiring countries, the Commission and the Council should focus on the substance of the reforms rather than on procedural steps. Regular Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) could be better mobilized to ensure such political steer.

In addition, we propose a pre-accession strategy containing a toolbox with a set of building blocks bringing candidate countries effectively closer to the EU through a more structured gradual integration, thus providing additional incentives for reforms. These building blocks should build on the progress made in the accession process and be reversible in case of backsliding of the relevant candidate country in its reform process and with regard to the EU core values and principles. While each candidate country should profit from a tailor-made approach, the new approach would offer immediate and tangible progress to all candidate countries. The aim of full EU membership remains unaffected, our intention is neither to replace full EU membership nor to prolong the path towards it but the opposite: We want to create incentives which foster swifter progress on that path. This way, we ensure that gradual integration contributes to successful EU enlargement – strengthening the EU as a whole.

We invite the Commission to present proposals to facilitate the gradual integration of candidate countries on their path towards EU accession. This should cover i.a. privileged access to the Internal Market on the basis of their substantive progress in the negotiations and closer links to the European institutions in the daily decision-making process, e.g. by granting progressive observer status to candidate countries in EU institutions meetings under conditions respecting the autonomy of the EU decision-making process.

Building blocks to make Enlargement a reality

Joint meetings of the European Commission/Members of the European Parliament with representatives of the Western Balkans countries and Moldova (each twice a year). *Requirement:* Application for membership.

More frequent joint parliamentary committees composed of members of the EP and national parliamentarians from the Western Balkans countries and Moldova. *Requirement:* Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) approval + invitation by the European Parliament.

Participation to specific agenda items of informal meetings of the European Council and of the Council.

Participation to specific agenda items of the Council as an observer without voting rights. *Requirement:* Closure of the relevant chapters in the accession process.

Participation in specific agenda items of Foreign Affairs Council meetings as observers without voting rights. *Requirement:* provisional closure of chapter 31 (FSDP).

Enhanced security and defence cooperation, including security and defence partnerships, PESCO projects, enhanced cooperation with Frontex, integration into the EU Agency for Cyber Security and the EU cyberattack early warning system. *Requirement:* fulfilment of the relevant criteria, i.e. +provisional closure of chapter 31 (FSDP).

Participation in EU programs and initiatives, including: Creative Europe/Digital Europe, official association to Erasmus+, further integration into Horizon Europe, Youth Experience Scheme, participation in EU pooling mechanisms for joint procurement, full access to the Technical Support Instrument, strengthening of Twinning and TAIEX instruments in the respective areas. *Requirements:* Fulfilment of the respective standards and requirements.

Sectoral Integration into the Single Market in the following areas: SEPA, Roam Like At Home, Transport Community, Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAAs), energy market, Emissions Trading System, green lanes, integration into EU policies on

competitiveness/industry strategies/critical raw materials, Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) status, Digital Single Market, more far-reaching SPS agreements, further reduction of non-tariff trade barriers, exemption from certain safeguard measures (similar to EEA states). *Requirement:* fulfilment of the respective standards and requirements and/or provisional closure of the relevant negotiating chapters.

Full participation in the Single Market based on an European Economic Area+ model. *Requirement:* adoption and implementation of the acquis regarding Clusters 1 to 5 and provisional closure of the relevant negotiating chapters, without prejudice to transitional periods and safeguards.

Agence Europe